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SOMETHING IN THE AIR

FLYING OFFICER "X"

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SOMETHING IN THE AIR

Comprising

The Greatest People in the World

and

How Sleep the Brave

Stories by

FLYING OFFICER "X"

JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE, LONDON

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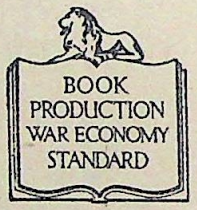

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The first nine stories were originally published as

THE GREATEST PEOPLE IN THE WORLD

Dedicated to

HILARY ST. GEORGE SAUNDERS

The remaining stories were originally published as

HOW SLEEP THE BRAVE

Dedicated to

JOHN PUDNEY

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IT'S NEVER IN THE PAPERS

EVERY morning when I came downstairs I sat in the mess and looked for it in the papers. "Last night our bombers," I would read. "Yesterday evening at dusk a strong formation." But what I really looked for was never there.

I used to consider the case of Dibden. Dibden was 25. He was a pilot with 33 operational trips and a D.F.C. to his name. He flew Stirlings and looked more than anything else like a dark, very handsome little Eskimo. You felt that it was a pure accident that he was flying a bomber instead of doing a roll in a kayak or having a snooze in an igloo.

Dibden was a good type, and a very good pilot indeed. But there were some who would not fly with him. Navigators, changed from their own crew, would suddenly develop violent toothache or trouble with their ears. Dibden was rather proud of the way he could land a Stirling in fair imitation of a golf-ball.

Once, on circuit and bumps, Dibden began to come in for landing with his air-speed down to ninety. He pulled her off again and did a sickly turn over the telegraph posts on the railway line and came back to land on the established golf-ball principle, hastily. "It was quite a moment," Dibden said.

There was nothing about that in the papers. Nor, of course, was there anything about the way he had all his operational hours carefully added up. His 33 trips amounted to 150 hours.

Very soon, with another 50 hours, Dibden would be a veteran; an old man of 25 who had watched

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others do their three and five and perhaps 15 trips and not return. Dibden always returned ; like a ball thrown at a wall he came back, and the harder you threw him the faster he returned.

Once or twice a week, when not on ops., Dibden got a little whistled, but the papers, of course, did not mention this either. You came into the mess late at night, tired, perhaps, after a spell of duty, to find Dibden bouncing from chair to chair, table to piano, like a smiling cherubic little Eskimo chasing an invisible bear.

At intervals he stopped being the Eskimo and became the bear, rushing up to other people, especially newcomers, to embrace them. "Bad type, bad type!" he would say. "Seize him, knock him down. Bad type!" We were all bad types when Dibden was whistled, but the papers, of course, did not mention this either. We are very good types really.

After these adventures others came down to breakfast with faces looking the colour of the sheepskin on their flying-boots ; they looked at the mess of kidneys and bacon and said, "My God, I've had it," and crawled away.

But not Dibden. He bounced in very late, more cherubic than ever, charmed the first overworked waitress into bringing him crisp rashers, potatoes, kidneys, fresh toast, and coffee, looked at the clock and said something about five minutes to make the hangars, and then began to eat as if he had returned from a hunting expedition. "Pretty whistled last night, boys," he would say. "Rather off my feed."

He spent most of the rest of his life being brassed off. "Good morning, Dibden," you would say. "How goes it?"

"Pretty much brassed off, old boy."

"Oh, what's wrong?"

"Just brassed off, that's all. Just brassed off."

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This phrase, which, of course, was never in the papers either, covered all the troubles of Dibden's life. It covered all his troubles with his kite, his crew, his ops., his leave, his food, his popsie.

He was brassed off when ops. were on because of the increasing monotony of trying to prang the same target ; he was brassed off when ops. were scrubbed because there was no target at all. He was brassed off because there was fog on the 'drome or because his popsie could not keep her date.

But however brassed off he was he succeeded in looking always the same : cherubic, grinning, bouncing, handsome, too irresponsible and altogether too like a schoolboy to be engaged in the serious business of flying an expensive bomber.

One afternoon Dibden was out over the coast of Holland on a daylight. It was his thirty-third trip : the veteran adding another four or five hours to his flying time. Down below, off the coast, he saw what he took to be an enemy tanker and he went down to have a look-see.

The tanker opened up at him with a fury of flak that surprised him, holing his port wing. I do not know what his emotions were, but I imagine that he was, simply, and as always, just brassed off. He went in and attacked the tanker with all he had, bombing first and then diving to machine-gun the deck.

The tanker hit back very hard, clipping a piece out of the starboard flap, but the more the tanker hit the more Dibden bounced back, like the ball thrown hard against the wall. His rear-gunner was very badly wounded, but Dibden still went in, firing with all he had left until the flak from the tanker ceased.

The next day there was in fact something about this in the papers. It did not sound very epic. " Yesterday afternoon one of our bombers attacked

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a tanker off the Dutch coast. After the engagement the tanker was seen to be burning."

It did not say anything about the holes in Dibden's wings or the way the outer port engine had cracked coming home. It did not in fact really say anything at all about that brief, bloody, and very bitter affair in which Dibden had bounced back repeatedly like an angry ball, or about the long journey home.

It did not say anything about Dibden landing on three engines with damaged flaps and a dying rear-gunner, or about a very tired, very brassed-off Dibden coming in very late, with an unexpected hour on his flying-time, to boiled beef and tea.

Nor did it say anything about what happened that night. A little after midnight I came into the mess and there, under the bright lights of the ante-room, Dibden was doing some acrobatics. It was a very nice little party. At one end of the room two leather settees were placed endwise against each other, and then against them, endwise again, two chairs.

As I came in, Dibden, more cherubic, more smiling, more like a handsome Eskimo than ever, took a drink of light ale and then did a running somersault over the long line of furniture, landing with a wild whoop on his feet. His eyes were shining wildly. After him one or two other pilots tried it, but none of them was really good, and the only one who was good landed on his head. Then Dibden tried it again, and the fat, smiling ball of his body went over as easily as a bird.

Perhaps there was no connection between the schoolboy Dibden joyfully throwing a somersault and the veteran Dibden angrily pranging a tanker. But as I saw Dibden hurling his fat little body into the air I felt suddenly that I understood all about his 33 trips, his golf-ball landings, his affairs with the tanker, and the long, hard journey home. I under-

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stood why he flew, and why he flew as he did, and I understood the man he was.

But there was nothing about that, of course, in the papers.

THERE'S NO FUTURE IN IT

THE nights he was not flying they would drive back late to the station, using her car. The flare-path would be laid ; the lights on the hangars would shine like red stars in the winter darkness above the flat land. Sometimes the searchlights would be up, throwing a blue-white fire that fell widely like moonlight on the dark trees and hedges and on the winding road. They would sit in the car and, holding each other, talk for a long time. Frost on the very coldest nights would form like a silver collar on the glass of the windscreen and sometimes, on very still nights, he would wind down the window of the car and listen for a moment or two to the silence outside. She would lean her head on his shoulder and look upwards into the dark sky and then, listening too, hear the sound of the bombers coming home.

It did not seem to matter much that they were never likely to be married. He was rather small and compact, with fresh grey eyes that he sometimes did not seem able to focus correctly. He had 31 operational trips to his credit and all that seemed to matter was that he should continue coming back.

The morning afterwards, perhaps, he would ring the office. He would say simply, "Hallo, dear, to-night." She would try to remain calm, and later, perhaps, if operations were scrubbed, he would ring her again and she would find herself trembling as she put down the telephone, all her pretence of calmness gone.

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She knew generally that he would be briefed in the early afternoon. He would take off about three o'clock or a little later and, according to the target, come back somewhere between eight and ten. It would often be too late to ring her after interrogation, but going to bed she would try to lie awake for the sound of the telephone. Sometimes she would fall asleep with the light still burning and would wake up in the small hours of the morning, bewildered and startled, not knowing where she was. Twice she fell half asleep and did not hear the telephone. Downstairs her father heard it, but after answering it, did not come to tell her who it was.

Her father was a rather big, grey-haired man with cheeks like loose pink rubber. He rolled his own cigarettes and it seemed to her that she never saw him without a newspaper. He rolled the cigarettes very badly—the tobacco fell wastefully on his clothes. The war had developed in him the latent qualities of the amateur strategist, and he always discussed the war while waving an untidy, wasteful cigarette. "We ought to have cut the Tripoli road long ago. Long ago. You have only to look at the map. The same with the bombing of Berlin. What's gone wrong? Why aren't we over there more? Why aren't we over there night after night? Striking early and often is the decisive factor. You'd suppose it wouldn't escape our people."

"Perhaps it's the weather," she would say.

"Weather? There's another thing that beats me. Argue on simple lines, draw some absolutely logical conclusion which ought to be apparent to the merest child, and you always get the same answer. The weather! I don't doubt the weather is sometimes bad. But far from always, far from always. It's too often a convenient excuse—like the workman blaming his tools."

"Nevertheless it nearly always is the weather."

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"Oh? Then what about last night? Clear moonlight like day. And was there a single operation? A couple of bombers over Brest."

"You talk as if Brest were a seaside resort."

"Look at the weather again to-night. Magnificent. And in the morning what shall we hear? The same old story again, I suppose. A handful of bombers over Brest. Or nothing at all."

"It's probably the most heavily defended place in Europe," she said. "It's just plain hell."

"Kitty, Kitty," her mother said. She looked up from her knitting, always khaki, and looked down again.

"Also I think you may find that to-night has been a big thing."

"Oh! you know, do you?"

"No. Not exactly. I've an idea, that's all."

"Ah! Your pilot friend."

She did not speak.

"You haven't brought him in lately."

"No, dear," her mother said.

"They spend most of their time out," her father said. "Somewhere."

Her mother spoke without looking up from her knitting.

"Were you at the *Red Lion* last week?" her mother said. "We heard you were there. Drinking with Air Force officers."

"I was."

"Is that the kind of place to be?" her father said.

"Drinking," her mother said. "It's not nice. Do you think so?"

"I want to be wherever he is."

"Even there? Couldn't you give him up?" her mother said. "He struck me as being older than he said. Do you know much about him? You are only twenty. It's all so terribly unsure. Perhaps he is married. Do you know?"

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She did not answer.

"He looks older than twenty-four," her mother said. "Experienced. His eyes look old."

She got up, calmly enraged, definite. "He has done things that make him old," she said, and went out of the room.

The following night they drove back late to the station. With the moon rising and the searchlights up, the road shone misty white between the dark hedges. The evening lay behind them, as always, simply secure; a few rounds of light ale at the *Red Lion*, the boys coming in group by group, the rounds growing, the crews mixing, sergeants with squadron leaders, gunners with navigators, warm broad Canadian voices mingled with English; and then the drive home, the blue lighting of the searchlights, and the moonlight throwing into relief the black winter trees, the hangars lit by red stars, the huge solitary dispersed aircraft in the fields; and lastly the silence after the car had stopped beyond the gate of the station.

"Was it a good trip, darling?"

He did not answer.

"Bad?"

"Pretty bad."

"Did you have trouble?"

"The usual. Ten-tenths most of the way and then some hellish flak."

She thought of her father. She saw him in an armchair, rolling the cigarettes, waving a newspaper. "Always the weather!"

"I'm sorry I couldn't ring," he said. "It was late when we got in for interrogation. I didn't want to wake you."

"I was awake," she said.

They sat still, not speaking. She thought again of her father.

"Tell me about the trip."

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"Nothing to tell. Routine stuff."

She did not like the sound of his voice, tired and guarded; the feeling that part of him was deliberately withheld.

"I can tell when you have trouble."

"What trouble? No trouble at all."

"Why have you got your hand in your pocket?" she said. "You've had it there all the time."

"All right," he said.

He began suddenly to tell her something about the trip. Though she had heard so much of it before, the awful significance of it was not lessened. He told her about the weather; ten-tenths, a bad storm soon after they turned for home, a spot of ice. "They put up a hell's own flak at us. Just routine stuff, only a bloody sight worse. And they hit my hand. Took the skin off, that's all." He kept it in his pocket.

She knew that he was not telling everything, that he never did, perhaps never would. Routine stuff, hellish flak, a spot of ice; the same words, the same repeated demand on courage, on fear if you like, the same holding back. She thought once more of her father: the world of the newspaper, the protest, the old indignations. To contrast it with the world of flak and ice, the long darkness of endurance, the spell of cold and strain 31 times repeated, was so difficult and angrily confusing that she said only, "Does your hand hurt? Can I do anything for you?"

"Thanks, darling, I'm O.K."

She remembered something.

"What time did interrogation finish? Why were you so late?"

"It wasn't so late. Not so very late."

"If it wasn't so late why didn't you ring me?"

"I didn't want to wake you."

"Tell me what happened," she said.

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He looked beyond the car window and said, "We got a bit shot up. Just one of those things."

"Bad?"

"Bad enough. A lump of flak blew a hole as big as a cartwheel in the starboard wing and the transmitter was u.s. Shaky landing. But why pick on me? It happens every day."

"Not to you."

"It happens," he said.

"You hate it, don't you?" she said.

"Hate what?" he said.

"You hate going, don't you, time after time? The same place. The same job. The same everything. I know you hate it."

"I hate it like hell," he said. He looked beyond the car window again. The diffused lighting of the searchlights and the cloudy moon shone on the misted windscreen. The trees were black against it. "But I hate what they're doing even more. That's what I really hate. What they do to me isn't half of what I mean doing to them. Not half. Not a quarter. Not a hundredth part. Is there anything wrong about hatred?"

She was thinking of her father, fussy with indignation, and she did not answer.

"It's good honest downright emotion, isn't it?" he said.

"Yes."

"Sometimes I think we want more of it," he said. "God, sometimes I think we do."

When at last she drove back from the station it was later than she thought. But at the house, to her surprise, her father and mother were still up. Her mother looked up from her knitting and her father looked at his watch.

"Either my watch is fast or it's ten past twelve." She did not speak.

"Even the *Red Lion* closes at ten."

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"It so happens I haven't been there."

Her father coughed heavily. "Does your pilot friend realise that we sit here, waiting?"

She did not answer.

"We have a right to be considered."

She stood slowly taking off her gloves.

"You'll agree that he owes us something, won't you?"

She stood thinking of the long flight in the darkness, the hellish flak, the hole in the wing, the shell through the fuselage, the shaky landing; routine stuff; easy, nothing to tell, something done again and again. Her mind became unsteady with hatred. She looked at her mother. The clean prejudiced hands were motionless on the knitting. Her father with the evening newspaper folded between his fingers stood with his back to the dying fire.

"Is he married?" her mother said.

"Does it matter?" she said.

Her father crackled the newspaper.

"My dear child, my dear child! Does it matter? I ask you. What about the future? Is there any future in that?"

"No," she said; "there's no future in it."

She wanted to go on speaking, but her thoughts were disrupted and dispersed in the corners of her mind and she could not gather them together. She wanted to say why there was no future. She wanted to tell them about the flak, the darkness, and the bitter cold, about the way the tracer bullets came in at you so slowly that you could watch them until suddenly they hurled with red frenzy past your face, about the hatred and the monotony and the courage that was greater because it was rarefied by terror. She wanted to tell them that if there was any future it lay through this.

She went out of the room and went upstairs instead. She felt stifled by the warmth of the room

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downstairs and, not putting on the light, she opened the window and stood looking out. The air was bright with frost and the coldness struck with a momentary shock on her face and hands.

She stood there for a long time, looking out. The moon was going down beyond the houses. The searchlights were no longer up beyond the town. The sky was clear and calm and, as if there were no war and as it might be in the future, if there were a future, there was no sound of wings.

THE YOUNG MAN FROM KALGOORLIE

I

He lived with his parents on a sheep-farm two hundred miles north-east of Kalgoorlie. The house was in the old style ; a simple white wooden cabin to which a few extensions had been added by successive generations. On the low hills east of the farm there were a few eucalyptus trees ; his mother grew pink and mauve asters under the house windows in summer ; and in spring the wattle was in blossom everywhere, like lemon foam. All of his life had been lived there, and the war itself was a year old before he knew that it had even begun.

On the bomber station, surrounded by flat grey English hills cropped mostly by sugar-beet and potatoes and steeped in winter-time in thick windless fogs that kept the aircraft grounded for days at a time, he used to tell me how it had come to happen that he did not know the war had started. It seemed that he used to go down to Kalgoorlie only once, perhaps twice, a year. I do not know what sort of place Kalgoorlie is, but it seemed that he did

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there, on that one visit or so, all the things that anyone can do on a visit to almost any town in the world. He used to take a room for a week at a hotel, get up at what he thought was a late hour every morning—about eight o'clock—and spend most of the day looking at shops, eating, and then looking at shops again. In the evenings he used to take in a cinema, eat another meal, have a couple of glasses of beer in the hotel lounge and then go to bed. He confessed that it wasn't very exciting and often he was relieved to get back into the Ford and drive steadily back to the sheep-farm and the familiar horizon of eucalyptus trees, which after the streets of Kalgoorie did not seem a bad prospect at all. The truth was that he did not know anyone in Kalgoorlie except an aunt, his mother's sister, who was very deaf and used a patent electrical acoustic device which always seemed to go wrong whenever he was there and which he had once spent more than a day trying to repair. He was very quiet and he did not easily get mixed up with people ; he was never drunk and more than half the time he was worried that his father was making a mess of things at home.

It was this which was really the cause of his not knowing about the war. His father was an unimaginative and rather careless man to whom sheep were simply sheep and grass simply grass and who had kept sheep on the same two thousand acres, within sight of the same eucalyptus trees, for 30 years, and expected to go on keeping them there for the rest of his life. He did not understand that two years of bad luck had anything to do with his having kept sheep in the same way, on the same grass, for so long. It was the son who discovered that. He began to see that the native grasses were played out, and in their place he decided to make sowings of Italian rye-grass and subterranean clover ; and soon

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he was able to change the flocks from one kind of grass to another and then on to a third and soon he could see an improvement in the health of every breed they had.

After that he was virtually in charge of the farm. His parents, who had always thought him a wonderful person, now thought him more wonderful still. When neighbours came—and this too was not often, since the nearest farm was another 30 miles up country—they talked of nothing but Albert's achievement. The sheep had improved in health, the yield of wool had increased, and even the mutton, they argued, tasted sweeter now, more like the meat of 30 years ago. "Got a proper old-fashioned flavour," his mother said.

It was about a year after these experiments of his —none of them very original, since he had simply read up the whole subject in an agricultural paper— that war broke out. It seemed, as he afterwards found out, that his mother first heard of it on an early morning news bulletin on the radio. She was scared and she called his father. The son himself was out on the farm, riding round on horseback taking a look at the sheep before breakfast. When he came in to breakfast he switched on the radio, but nothing happened. He opened up the radio and took a look at it. All the valves were warm, but the detector valve and another were not operating. It seemed a little odd but he did not take much notice of it. All he could do was to write to Kalgoorlie for the spare valves, and he did so in a letter which he wrote after dinner that day. It was three miles to the post-box and if there were any letters to be posted his mother took them down in the afternoon. His mother took this letter that afternoon and tore it up in little pieces.

That must have happened, he discovered, to every letter he wrote to the Kalgoorlie radio shop

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in the next twelve months. No valves ever came and gradually, since it was summer and sheep-shearing time and the busiest season of the year, the family got use to being without the radio. His father and mother said they even preferred it. All the time he had no idea of the things they were doing in order to keep the war from him. The incoming post arrived once a week and if there were any letters for him his mother steamed them open, read them and then put the dangerous ones away in a drawer upstairs. The newspapers stopped coming, and when he remarked on it his father said he was tired of wasting good money on papers that were anyway nearly a week old before they came. If there were visitors his mother managed to meet them before they reached the house. In October the sheep-shearing contractors came and his father, ordinarily a rather careful man, gave every man an extra pound to keep his mouth shut. All through that summer and the following winter his mother looked very ill, but it was not until later that he knew the reason of it—the strain of intercepting the letters, of constantly guarded conversation, of warning neighbours and callers, of making excuses and even of lying to him, day after day, for almost a year.

The time came when he decided to go to Kalgoorlie. He always went there about the same time of the year, in late August, before the busy season started. His parents must have anticipated and dreaded that moment, and his father did an amazing thing. In the third week of August, early one morning, he put two tablespoonfuls of salt in a cup of hot tea and drank it, making himself very sick. By the time Albert came in to breakfast his father was back in bed, very yellow in the face, and his mother was crying because he had been taken suddenly ill. It was the strangest piece of deception of all and it might have succeeded if his father had not overdone

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things. He decided to remain in bed for a second week, making himself sick every third or fourth day, knowing that once September had come Albert would never leave. But Albert was worried. He did not like the recurrent sickness which now affected his father and he began to fear some sort of internal trouble.

"I'm going to Kalgoorlie whether you like it or not," he said, "to get a doctor."

II

It was on the bomber station, when he had become a pilot, that he used to tell me of that first day in Kalgoorlie, one of the most remarkable in his life. When he left the farm his mother seemed very upset, and began crying. He felt that she was worried about his father; he was increasingly worried too and promised to be back within three days. Then he drove down to Kalgoorlie alone: perhaps the only man in Australia who did not know that the war was a year old.

He arrived at Kalgoorlie about four o'clock in the afternoon and the town seemed much the same as ever. He drove straight to the hotel he always stayed at, booked himself a room and went upstairs to wash and change. About five o'clock he came down again and went into the hotel lounge for a cup of tea. Except for a word or two with the cashier and the lift-boy he did not speak to a soul. He finished his tea and then decided to go to the downstairs saloon, as he always did, to get himself a haircut. There were several people waiting in the saloon, but he decided to wait too. He sat down and picked up a paper.

He must have gone on staring at that paper, not really reading it, for about ten minutes. It was late

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August and the Nazis were bombing London. He did not understand any of it ; who was fighting or what were the causes of it. He simply took in, from the headlines, the story of the great sky battles, the bombing, the murder and destruction, as if they were part of a ghastly fantasy. For the moment he did not feel angry or sick or outraged because he had been deceived. He got up and went out into the street. What he felt, he told me, was very much as if you were suddenly to discover that you had been living in a house where, without knowing it, there was a carrier of smallpox. For months you have lived an ordinary tranquil life, unsuspecting and unafraid, and then suddenly you made the awful discovery that every fragment of your life, from the dust in your shoes to the air you breathed, was contaminated and that you had been living in danger. Because you knew nothing you were not afraid ; but the moment you knew anything all the fears and terrors you had not felt in the past were precipitated into a single terrible moment of realisation.

He also felt a fool. He walked up and down the street. As he passed shops, read placards, saw men in service uniform, fragmentary parts of his life during the past year became joined together, making sense : the broken radio, his unanswered letters, the newspapers, his mother's nervousness and the fact, above all, that they had not wanted him to come to Kalgoorlie. Slowly he understood all this. He tried to look on it as the simple cunning of country people. He was still too confused to be angry. But what he still did not understand, and what he had to find out about soon, was the war. He did not even know how long it had been going on. He stopped on a street-corner and bought another newspaper. The day before, he read, 87 aircraft had been shot down over England. His hands were

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trembling as he read it, but it did not tell him the things he wanted to know. And he realised suddenly, as he stood there trembling in the hot sunshine, so amazed that he was still without feeling, that there was no means of knowing these things. He certainly could not know by asking. He imagined for a moment the effect of asking anyone, in the street, or the hotel, or back in the barber's saloon, a simple question like "Can you tell me when the war began?" He felt greatly oppressed by a sense of ridicule and bewilderment, by the fear that now, any time he opened his mouth, he was likely to make a ghastly fool of himself.

He walked about for an hour or more, pretending to look at shops, before it occurred to him what to do. Then it came to him quite suddenly that he would go and see the only other person he knew, who, like himself, could be cut off from the world of reality; the deaf aunt who lived in Kalgoorlie.

So he spent most of that evening in the old-fashioned parlour of her house, drinking tea, eating custard tarts, lightly brown with veins of nutmeg, and talking as steadily as he could into the electrical acoustic device fixed to the bodice of her dress. From such remarks as "Things look pretty tough in England. Let's see, how long exactly has it been going on now?" he learned most of the elementary things he wanted to know. But there were still things he could not ask simply because he had no knowledge of them. He could not ask about France or Poland or Holland or Norway. All that he really understood clearly was that England and Germany were at war; that England was being bombed every day by great forces of aircraft; that soon, perhaps, she would be invaded. The simplicity and limitation of his knowledge was in a way, as he said, a good thing. For as he ate the last of the old lady's custard tarts and drank the last cup of tea and said good

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night to her he changed from being the man who knew least about the war in all Australia to the man who had perhaps the clearest, simplest, and most vivid conception of it in the whole continent. Forty years back his father and mother had emigrated from Lincolnshire to Kalgoorlie. Young, newly wed, and with about eighty pounds apart from their passage money, they started a new life. Now the roots of their existence, and so in a way the roots of his own existence, were being threatened with annihilation. This was the clear, simple, terrible thing he understood in such a clear, simple, terrible way.

When he got back to his hotel he drafted a telegram to his parents, telling them, as well as he could, that he understood. Then in the morning he went round to the nearest recruiting centre. I have not so far described what he was like. He was rather tall, fair, and brown in the face ; his eyes were a cool blue and his lips thin, determined, and rather tight. He was just 22 and he had no way of holding back his anger.

" I want to be a pilot," he said.

" All right," they said. " Good. But you can't be a pilot all of a sudden, just like that."

" No ? " he said. " No ? We'll bloody soon see."

III

He adjusted himself as time went on but he carried some of his first angry, clear, terrible conceptions of things across the sea ; across the Pacific to Vancouver, across the Atlantic to England. He was never angry with his parents and they in turn ceased being afraid about him. He used to describe to me how he went home on his first leave. From being

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stupidly affectionate in one way about him they became stupidly affectionate in quite another. They had not wanted him to go ; now, because he had gone, they behaved as if they had everything to do with sending him and nothing to do with keeping him away. They had arranged a party and he said it was the largest gathering of folks anyone had ever seen on the farm. They invited everyone for 30 miles around and one or two people from 50 miles away. They killed several spring lambs and about fifteen fowls and tea was brewing all day long. At night they sang hymns and old songs in the drawing-room round the piano, and they slept in round beds on the floor. In the end he was almost glad to get away.

He promised to write to them often, and he promised also to keep a diary. He always did write and he always kept the diary. He sailed for Vancouver early in the year and by the spring he was flying Ansons and by the summer he was in England. It was an uncertain and rather treacherous summer and the harvest was wet and late in the corn country where we were. The potato fields were blighted, so that they looked as if spattered by drops of coffee on the dark rainy autumn days, and for long periods low cloud kept the aircraft down. Gradually the harvest fields were cleaned and the potatoes sacked and carted away, and in place of them you could see pale golden cones of sugar-beet piled in the fields and by the roadsides. I mention the weather because it was almost the only thing about England that troubled him. He longed for the hot dry air of the Australian summer and he used to tell me, as we gazed over the wet flat country, of the days when he had flown over Victoria in a Moth in his shirt sleeves and had looked down on the white beaches shining all along the coast in the sun.

The weather troubled him because his anger was

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still there. He felt that it frustrated him. He could never forget the day in Kalgoorlie when he had first read of the bombing and the mass murder in England and the very headlines of the paper had seemed like an awful dream. He felt that so much of his life had still to be brought up to date. Something had to be vindicated. Yet you could never tell that he was angry. It was easier to tell that he was sometimes afraid : not that he was afraid of dying or being hurt, but of some material thing like mishandling a kite. As he graduated from Moths to Ansons, to Blenheims and Wellingtons, and finally to Stirlings he felt each time that he would never be big enough for the change to the bigger aircraft, yet it was always because of that fear that he was big enough.

Late that autumn he became captain of a Stirling and about the same time he got to know a girl. Two or three evenings a week, if there were no operations, we used to go down into the town and drink a few glasses of beer at a pub called *The Grenadier*, and one evening this girl came in. She was very dark and rather sophisticated, with very red lips, and she never wore her coat in the ordinary way but simply had it slung on her shoulders, with the sleeves empty and dangling. " This is Olivia," he said. For some reason I never knew her other name ; we most often called her Albert's popsie, but after that, every night we were in *The Grenadier*, she would come in and soon, after talking for a time, they would go off somewhere alone together. The weather was very bad at that time and he saw her quite often. And then for a few nights it cleared and one night, before going over to Bremen, he asked if I would keep his date with her and make his apologies and explain.

He had arranged to see her at seven o'clock and I made a bad impression by being late. She was

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irritable because I was late and because, above all, I was the wrong person.

"Don't be angry," I said. "I'm very sorry."

"I'm not angry," she said. "Don't think it. I'm just worried."

"You needn't be worried," I said.

"Why not? Aren't you worried? You're his friend."

"No, I'm not worried," I said. "I'm not worried because I know what sort of pilot he is."

"Oh! you do, do you? Well, what sort of pilot is he?" she said. "He never tells me. He never talks about it at all."

"They never do," I said.

"Sometimes I think I'll never know what sort of person he is at all. Never!"

I felt there was little I could say to her. She was angry because I was the wrong person and because she was frustrated. I bought her several drinks. For a time she was quieter and then once more she got excited.

"One night he'll get shot down and about all I'll know of him is that his name was Albert!"

"Take it easy," I said. "In the first place he won't get shot down."

"No? How are you so sure?"

"Because he's the sort that shoots other people down first."

"Are you trying to be funny?" she said.

"No," I said; and for a few minutes I tried to tell her why it was not funny and why I had spoken that way. I tried quite hard but I do not think she understood. I realise that she knew nothing of all that had happened in Kalgoorlie; the blank year, the awful discovery about England, the bewilderment and the anger. I tried to make her see that there is a type that thinks of nothing but the idea that he may be shot at; and that there is another

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type, of which he was one, which thinks of nothing but shooting first. "He's glad to go. He wants to go. It's what he lives for," I said. "Don't you see?"

No sooner had I said it than I realised that it was the stupidest thing in the world to say. It was herself, not flying, that she wanted him to live for. She did not understand, and it would have sounded very silly if I had tried to tell her, that he was engaged on something like a mission of vengeance, that because of all that had happened in Kalgoorlie, and especially that one day in Kalgoorlie, he felt that he had something damnable and cruel and hideous to wipe out from his conception of what was a decent life on earth. Every time he went up something was vindicated. Nor did she understand, and again it might have sounded foolish too, that it was the living and positive clarity of the whole idea that was really his preservation. All I could say was, "He's the sort that goes on coming back and coming back until they're fed up with him and make him an instructor."

Nevertheless, that night, her fears were almost justified. The flak over Bremen was very hostile and it seemed that he had to take a lot of hasty evasive action before he could get clear away along the coast. They had brought him down even then to about 2,000 feet. The searchlights were very thick too and it was like daylight in the aircraft marking the time. But as if he couldn't possibly miss the opportunity, he came down to 300 feet, roaring over the searchlight batteries as his gunners attacked them. They flew for about 40 miles in this way, until finally something hit the outer starboard engine and holed the starboard wing. After that they were in a very bad way and got home, as he said, later than originally proposed.

I do not think he told her about this. It went

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down into his log and some of it may have gone down into the diary he had promised faithfully to keep for his people back on the farm. He was satisfied that he had blown out about 20 searchlights and that was all. Something else was vindicated. Two days later he had another go. In quite a short daylight attack along the Dutch coast he got into an argument with a flak ship. He was in a very positive mood and he decided to go down to attack. As he was coming in, his rear-gunner sighted a formation of Messerschmitts coming up astern, and two minutes later they attacked him. He must have engaged them for about 15 minutes. He had always hated Messerschmitts and to be attacked by them made him very angry indeed. At the end of the engagement he had shot down two of them and had crippled a third, but they in turn had holed the aircraft in 15 places. Nevertheless he went down just to carry out his instruction of giving the flak ship a good-bye kiss. She had ceased firing and he went in almost to low level and just missed her with his last two bombs by the stern. As he was coming home his outer port engine gave up, but he tootled in just before darkness, quite happy. "A piece o' cake," he said.

I know that he did not tell her about this either, and I could see that she had some excuse for thinking him undemonstrative and perhaps unheroic. For the next two days there was thick fog and rime frost in the early morning that covered the wings of the Stirlings with dusty silver. He was impatient because of the fog and we played many games of cribbage in the mess on the second day, while the crews were standing down.

On the third day he came back from briefing with a very satisfied look on his face. "A little visit to Mr. Salmon and Mr. Gluckstein at Brest," he said. He had been flying just a year. He had done twenty

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trips, all of them with the same meaning. It was a bright calm day, without cloud, quite warm in the winter sun. There were pools of water here and there on the runways and looking through the glasses I could see little brushy silver tails spurting up from the wheels of the aircraft as they taxied away.

When I looked into the air, again through the glasses, I saw two aircraft circling round, waiting to formate before setting course. One of them was smoking a little from the outer port engine. The smoking seemed to increase a little and then became black. Suddenly it seemed as if the whole engine burst silently and softly into crimson flower. I kept looking through the glasses, transfixed, but suddenly the aircraft went away behind the hangars as it came down.

That evening I waited until it was quite dark before going into the town. I went into the bar of *The Grenadier* and the girl was standing by the bar talking to the barmaid. She was drinking a port while waiting for him to come.

"Hullo," she said. Her voice was cold and I knew that she was disappointed.

"Hullo. Could you come outside a moment?" I said.

She finished her port and came outside and we stood in the street, in the darkness. Some people went by, shining a torch on the dirty road, and in the light I could see the sleeves of her coat hanging loose, as if she had no arms. I waited until the people had gone by, and then, not knowing how to say it, I told her what had happened. "It wasn't very heroic," I said. "It was damnable luck. Just damnable luck, that's all."

I was afraid she would cry.

She stood still and quite silent. I felt that I had to do something to comfort her and I made as if to take hold of her arm, but I only caught the sleeve,

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which was dead and empty. I felt suddenly far away from her and as if we had known two different people : almost as if she had not known him at all.

"I'll take you to have a drink," I said.

"No."

"You'll feel better."

"Why did it have to happen ?" she said suddenly, raising her voice. "Why did it have to happen ?"

"It's the way it often does happen," I said.

"Yes, it's the way it often does happen !" she said. "Is that all you care ? Is that all anyone cares ? It's the way it happens !"

I did not speak. For a moment I was not thinking of her. I was thinking of a young man in a barber's saloon in Kalgoorlie, about to make the shocking discovery that the world was at war and that he did not know it.

"Yes, it's the way it happens !" she said. I could not see her face in the darkness, but her voice was very bitter now. "In a week nobody will ever know he flew. He's just one of thousands who go up and never come back. I never knew him. Nobody ever knew him. In a week nobody will know him from anyone else. Nobody will even remember him."

For a moment I did not answer. Now I was not thinking of him. I was thinking of the two people who had so bravely and stupidly kept the war from him and then had so bravely and proudly let him go. I was thinking of the farm with the sheep and the eucalyptus trees, the pink and mauve asters and the yellow spring wattle flaming in the sun. I was thinking of the thousands of farms like it, peopled by thousands of people like them : the simple, decent, kindly, immemorial people all over the earth.

"No," I said to her. "There will be many who will remember him."

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IT'S JUST THE WAY IT IS

NOVEMBER rain falls harshly on the clean tarmac, and the wind, turning suddenly, lifts sprays of yellow elm leaves over the black hangars.

The man and woman, escorted by a sergeant, look very small as they walk by the huge cavernous openings where the bombers are.

The man, who is perhaps fifty and wears a black overcoat and bowler hat, holds an umbrella slantwise over the woman, who is about the same age, but very grey and slow on her feet, so that she is always a pace or two behind the umbrella and must bend her face against the rain.

On the open track beyond the hangars they are caught up by the wind, and are partially blown along, huddled together. Now and then the man looks up at the Stirlings, which protrude over the track, but he looks quickly away again and the woman does not look at all.

"Here we are, sir," the sergeant says at last. The man says "Thank you," but the woman does not speak.

They have come to a long one-storeyed building, painted grey, with "Squadron Headquarters" in white letters on the door. The sergeant opens the door for them and they go in, the man flapping and shaking the umbrella as he closes it down.

The office of the Wing Commander is at the end of a passage; the sergeant taps on the door, opens it and salutes. As the man and woman follow him, the man first, taking off his hat, the woman hangs a little behind, her face passive.

"Mr. and Mrs. Shepherd, sir," the sergeant says.

"Oh, yes, good afternoon." The sergeant, saluting, closes the door and goes.

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her words, violent and helpless, until at last she is exhausted and stops. Her fur slips off her shoulder and falls to the ground, and the man picks it up and holds it in his hands, helpless, too.

The Wing Commander walks over to the window and looks out. The airscrews of the Stirling are turning smoothly, shining like steel pin-wheels in the rain, and now, with the woman no longer shouting, the room seems very silent, and finally the Wing Commander walks back across the room and stands in front of the man and woman again.

"You came to ask me something," he says.

"Take no notice, sir. Please. She is upset."

"You want to know what happened? Isn't that it?"

"Yes, sir. It would help us a little, sir."

The Wing Commander says very quietly: "Perhaps I can tell you a little. He was always coming to me and asking to go out on operations. Most of them do that. But he used to come and beg to be allowed to go more than most. So more often than not it was a question of stopping him from going rather than making him go. It was a question of holding him back. You see?"

"Yes, sir."

"And whenever I gave him a trip he was very happy. And the crew were happy. They liked going with him. They liked being together, with him, because they liked him so much and they trusted him. There were seven of them and they were all together."

The woman is listening, slightly lifting her head.

"It isn't easy to tell you what happened on that trip. But we know that conditions got suddenly very bad and that there was bad cloud for a long way. And we know that they had navigational

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difficulties and that they got a long way off their course.

"Even that might not have mattered, but as they were coming back the outer port engine went. Then the radio transmitter went and the receiver. Everything went wrong. The wireless operator somehow got the transmitter and the receiver going again, but then they ran short of petrol. You see, everything was against him."

"Yes, sir."

"They came back the last hundred miles at about a thousand feet. But they trusted him completely, and he must have known they trusted him. A crew gets like that—flying together gives them this tremendous faith in each other."

"Yes, sir."

"They trusted him to get them home, and he got them home. Everything was against him. He feathered the outer starboard engine and then, in spite of everything, got them down on two engines. It was a very good show. A very wonderful show."

The man is silent, but the woman lifts her head. She looks at the Wing Commander for a moment or two, immobile, very steady, and then says, quite distinctly, "Please tell us the rest."

"There is not much," he says. "It was a very wonderful flight, but they were out of luck. They were up against all the bad luck in the world. When they came to land they couldn't see the flare-path very well, but he got them down. And then, as if they hadn't had enough, they came down slightly off the runway and hit an obstruction. Even then they didn't crash badly. But it must have thrown him and he must have hit his head somewhere with great force, and that was the end."

"Yes, sir. And the others?" the man says.

"They were all right. Even the second pilot. I wish you could have talked to them. It would have

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helped if you could have talked to them. They know that he brought them home. They know that they owe everything to him."

"Yes, sir."

The Wing Commander does not speak, and the man very slowly puts the fur over the woman's shoulders. It is like a signal for her to get up, and as she gets to her feet the man stands up too, straightening himself, no longer leaning on the umbrella.

"I haven't been able to tell you much," the Wing Commander says. "It's just the way it is."

"It's everything," the man says.

For a moment the woman still does not speak, but now she stands quite erect. Her eyes are quite clear, and her lips, when she does speak at last, are quite calm and firm.

"I know now that we all owe something to him," she says. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye, madam."

"Good-bye, sir," the man says.

"You are all right for transport?"

"Yes, sir. We have a taxi."

"Good. The sergeant will take you back."

"Good-bye, sir. Thank you."

"Good-bye," the woman says.

"Good-bye."

They go out of the office. The sergeant meets them at the outer door, and the man puts up the umbrella against the rain. They walk away along the wet perimeter, dwarfed once again by the grey-green noses of the Stirlings. They walk steadfastly, almost proudly, and the man holds the umbrella a little higher than before, and the woman, keeping up with him now, lifts her head.

And the Wing Commander, watching them from the window, momentarily holds his face in his hands.

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THE SUN RISES TWICE

PERHAPS the finest pilot I ever knew was Eddington-Green, whom we called E.G. He had no medals.

E.G. was small and compact, with cool, light, devilish, imperturbable eyes. His hands were surprisingly large for so small a man. On each hand the muscle between the thumb and forefinger, on the back of the hand, was very powerful. It stood out like a swelling.

He had made it hard and powerful by ju-jitsu, but he was afraid of practising the ju-jitsu any longer for fear of hurting, perhaps killing, someone. He looked a small man to kill anybody.

Pilots are often interested in nothing but popsies, kites, and beer. E.G. was interested in many things : so many that I never found out about them all. He raced motor-cars and collected stamps ; he was interested in ships, had served in the Navy, and was a good radiographer. He had surprising tastes in advanced music ; he was a good revolver shot and he was fond of flowers.

One of the few things he was not interested in, it seemed, was getting drunk. There were few parties for E.G. He did not stay up for those occasions, after ops., when air-crews relieve their feelings by doing trapeze acts over sofas.

After a long, hard trip he would come into the mess quite quietly ; drink a small light ale ; warm his hands by the fire and talk for a few minutes ; say that the trip was good or bad, in about as many words, and then go to bed.

It was almost a tradition that no one ever came home before him. No one flew a Stirling so fast and no one, except E.G. himself, knew why.

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There was once an occasion when a force of Stirlings, owing to some sudden change of weather at base, was recalled from Northern Germany. All the kites, except E.G., were but 70 miles short of their target. E.G. was over the target. He was not long over the target, but he remained there long enough to do a circus act with a ring of searchlights, shooting them out one by one before turning for home. This shook even Intelligence. "You've no business to have got so far," they said.

There is no doubt, of course, that he had been there. He had been there simply because he said so. E.G. never shot a false line, or claimed a target unless he was sure.

The secret of his flying so fast was a trick, but it also had something artistic in it. It was one of those things he was never tired of working out for himself; and which seemed so simple when it was done. In the same way he used to watch the reactions of himself and other people to living and flying. He used to note how calm and clear and sure and icy he became in the periods when he did not drink at all. He used to note how shaky and sometimes how short-lived were those who did.

In E.G.'s squadron there was at one time a man named Tusser; a big crude ex-civil pilot, who hated Stirlings. Tusser, heavy and bullying, would be badly whistled six non-operational nights out of seven. E.G., who knew why Tusser was whistled and why he bullied and why he hated Stirlings, said, "I give him six more trips." Two trips later Tusser did not return.

I don't want to give the impression that E.G. was perfect; but that he was interested not only in flying but also in the things that flying does to men. I shall say nothing about the time he calmly formated with two Me. 109s, he himself flying solo, in an Anson trainer.

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I liked to hear him describe the feelings and the sight of flight : the solo loneliness, the tracer coming up at you slow and orange until the last furious flashing moment, the moon over the miles and miles of cotton cloud, the flak so thick and many-coloured that it hung in the night air like paper streamers at a ball.

I liked to hear him talk of the time when he was coming home from a night trip to France. It was summer and he was flying at about 18,000 watching the sun rising over the sea. In the serene and beautiful air the sun floated upward like an orange behind the rim of the yellow horizon. Below was a solitary ship, which the navigator reported was smoking badly.

E.G., always curious, put the aircraft into a turn, and, going back, went down to about 10,000 in order to look at her. From that height, in the clear summer morning air, he took the ship to be a merchantman of about 9,000 tons and he took her now to be smoking quite naturally, as if she were stoking up. So he turned the aircraft away, keeping the same height, and headed her again towards England.

And then, from that lower altitude, he saw an amazing thing. He saw the sun just trying to float upward over the horizon : rising for the second time on the same day.

If it had not been for a sense of great curiosity, a strong independent persistence, E.G. would never have seen this at all. It was as if he was living part of his life twice over. This quality of curiosity and independence, which made him test his reactions to drink and work out devices for flying faster and turn back to look at solitary ships that might be in trouble, made him the kind of pilot he was, and once, when he was flying Stirlings, almost finished him as a pilot altogether. His life would have been so much easier, so much smoother, and so much

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duller if he had kept to other people's rules instead of making his own.

The weather was not very good when he set out that afternoon to fly into Holland, to attack somewhere inland a target whose name I have forgotten.

It was late December and the weather had been intermittently dirty for several weeks. As E.G. crossed the coast somewhere beyond Scheveningen the weather suddenly closed down, dark and rainy, and he knew after a few minutes that the chances of seeing the target had gone. There was only one other aircraft with him, and after he had called it up they decided to turn back to sea. "Keep to the coast," E.G. said. "We may see a little shipping."

He lost sight of the other aircraft, but his own peculiar independent curiosity made him turn down towards the Hook of Holland instead of out to the open sea. In a couple of hours, if he had been sensible, he could have been eating lobster paste, Swiss roll, or smiling at the W.A.A.F. waitresses, fresh with their afternoon lipstick, in the mess. Instead, he turned the aircraft south-westward, just beyond sight of the coast, to look for shipping.

It was about ten minutes later that his navigator, a big, husky Canadian, who was never really happy except when fighting, called out over the inter-comm. that he could see a tanker below. E.G. turned and saw her, too ; she seemed quite large ; he thought perhaps about 12,000 tons.

He saw, too, that she had two other ships with her, and they seemed very small beside her. They seemed so small, indeed, that he took them for tugs that had come out to meet her from the coast. It was a great mistake : as he found out later.

He turned away at once to make his first bombing run. The weather was clearer now. The cloud was higher, with breaks in it. There was no rain. He took his time and came in level and low, but not

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too low, dead over the tanker, and the navigator let go about a third of his bombs.

As he came down, the little escort ships, which he had thought were tugs, hit him with a surprising blaze of fire. He knew then what they were : not tugs, but escort flak ships, and they had holed his starboard wing.

From then he could have turned and gone safely home to lobster paste, Swiss roll, and the W.A.A.F.s in their cool blue uniforms pouring the tea. Instead, he drew away for a second bombing run. He came in level and low again. The flak was heavier than ever now and when he drew out again the aircraft, rocking badly, was full of smoke. Even then he could have gone home. Instead, he called the navigator.

" How many left, Mac ? "

" Seven."

" O.K.," he said. " This time."

He drew away for the third time. He drew away much farther this time and came in much lower, so that the gunners could use their guns. He came in just over the mast of the tanker.

He saw the crew running across the deck. He saw them fall over each other, over the gear lying on the decks ; and down the open hatches. He saw the tracer fire swinging up from the flak ships, like a series of violent orange balls thrown by a conjurer, first casual, then very fast, flying all about him as he dived.

He felt everything suddenly dissolve in a tremendous blast of fire. He felt that his ear-drums had been smashed. He could not see. " This is it," he thought. " We've had it. This is it."

He tried to pull the 'plane out of the dive that had taken them so low that it seemed they must clip off the mast of the ship, but for a few moments she would not come. She went soaring along, rocking

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violently, just above the dirty surface of the sea.

He strained hard to pull her out, and at last, slowly and heavily, she came out and began to climb. At that moment, too, his hearing came back. He heard a raging confusion of excited voices over the inter-comm. The whole crew seemed to be shouting wildly, and what they were shouting shook him for a moment worse than the flak, the explosion, and the dive had done.

"For God's sake. Fighters!"

He did not realise until that moment what had happened, that the tanker had been steaming steadily into port and that he had been following her in. He suddenly saw below him the flat, grey edge of coast; then the dark line of fighters coming up astern from the land. He had just time to see the black smoke of burning tanker ballooning up below him before he turned out to sea.

He realised at once that the 'plane would not manœuvre. He was flying at about 300 feet, perhaps less, above the sea. The afternoon was already darkening. Heavy cloud was driving in from the land. His speed was down to about 130, and he could neither increase it nor climb.

The 'plane was dead and heavy and soon the yelling in the inter-comm., which had temporarily ceased, began again. "They're coming bloody close, E.G.", the navigator said. "Jeez, they're bloody close."

The 'plane would still not manœuvre and he still could not increase the speed, but at that last moment he induced her to climb. She climbed very slowly to six or seven hundred feet and as he made height he saw ahead of him a patch of dirty cloud. He went into it and when finally he came out of it, ten minutes later, the fighters were no longer to be seen.

He came home all the way, in half darkness and then in total darkness, through heavy rain, at what is sometimes jovially described as nought feet. He

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had only three engines and his speed was never more than 130. He could not see the flare-path well, and he landed too fast, lucky to land at all. It was a brave, exciting, shaky do.

"Did you prang the tanker?" Intelligence said.

"She was smoking."

"But did you hit it?"

"We wouldn't claim it," E.G. said. "We're not sure."

"Mac?"

"Jeez," Mac said, "we gave 'em hell. I don't claim no more than that. That's all I know."

Intelligence, who is very charming, smiled.

"Are you bloody crazy?" he said, "or don't you care?"

E.G., who is also charming, but who claims no hit he does not see, who never drinks because he remembers his crew, who flies faster than anyone else and makes his own rules and has no medals, smiled back in answer.

"A little of both," he said.

They gave him no medals for that. But perhaps he is the sort of man who needs no medals.

The sun rises twice for him.

NO TROUBLE AT ALL

THE day was to be great in the history of the Station; it was just my luck that I didn't come back from leave until late afternoon. All day the sunlight had been a soft orange colour and the sky a clear wintry blue, without mist or cloud. There was no one in the mess ante-room except a few of the night-staff dozing before the fire, and no one I could talk to except the little W.A.A.F. who sits by the telephone.

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So I asked her about the show. "Do you know how many have gone?" I said.

"Ten, sir," she said.

"Any back yet?"

"Seven were back a little while ago," she said. "They should all be back very soon."

"When did they go? This morning?"

"Yes, sir. About ten o'clock." She was not young; but her face was pleasant and eager and, as at the moment, could become alight. "They looked marvellous as they went, sir," she said. "You should have seen them, sir. Shining in the sun."

"Who isn't back? You don't know?"

But she did know.

"K for Kitty and L for London aren't back," she said. "But I don't know the other."

"It must be Brest again?" I said.

"Yes, sir," she said. "I think it's Brest."

I didn't say anything, and she said, "They are putting you in Room 20 this time, sir."

"Thank you. I'll go up," I said.

As I went upstairs and as I bathed and changed I made calculations. It was half-past three in the afternoon and the winter sun was already growing crimson above the blue edges of flat ploughed land beyond the Station buildings. I reckoned up how far it was to Brest. If you allowed half an hour over the target and a little trouble getting away, even the stragglers should be back by four. It seemed, too, as if fog might come down very suddenly; the sun was too red and the rim of the earth too blue. I realised that if they were not back soon they wouldn't be back at all. They always looked very beautiful in the sun, as the little W.A.A.F. said, but they looked still more beautiful on the ground. I didn't know who the pilot of L for London was; but I knew, and was remembering, that K for Kitty was my friend.

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By the time I went downstairs again the lights were burning in the ante-room but the curtains were not drawn and the evening, sunless now, was a vivid electric blue beyond the windows. The little W.A.A.F. still sat by the telephone and as I went past she looked up and said :

" L for London is back, sir."

I went into the ante-room. The fire was bright and the first crews, back from interrogation, were warming their hands. Their faces looked raw and cold. They still wore sweaters and flying boots and their eyes were glassy.

" Hallo," they said. " You're back. Good leave ? " They spoke as if it was I, not they, who had been 300 miles away.

" Hallo, Max," I said. " Hallo, Ed. Hallo, J.B."

I had been away for five days. For a minute I felt remote ; I couldn't touch them.

I was glad when someone else came in.

" Hallo. Good trip ? "

" Quite a picnic."

" Good. See anything ? "

" Everything."

" Good show, good show. Prang them ? "

" Think so. Fires burning when we got there."

" Good show."

I looked at their faces. They were tired and hollow. In their eyes neither relief nor exhilaration had begun to filter through the glassiness of long strain. They talked laconically, reluctantly, as if their lips were frozen.

" Many fighters ? "

" Hordes."

" Any trouble ? "

" The whole bloody crew was yelling fighters. Came up from everywhere."

" Any Spits ? "

" Plenty. Had five Me.'s on my tail. Then

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suddenly wham ! Three Spits came up from nowhere. Never saw anything like those Me.'s going home to tea.

" Good show. Good show."

The evening was darkening rapidly and the mess-steward came in to draw the curtains. I remembered K for Kitty and suddenly I went out of the ante-room and stood for a moment in the blue damp twilight, listening and looking at the sky. The first few evening stars were shining and I could feel that later the night would be frosty. But there was no sound of a 'plane.

I went back into the ante-room at last and for a moment, in the bright and now crowded room, I could not believe my eyes. Rubbing his cold hands together, his eyes remote and chilled, his sweater hanging loose below his battle-dress, the pilot of K for Kitty was standing by the fireplace. There was a cross of flesh-pink plastic bandage on his forehead and I knew that something had happened.

" Hallo," I said.

" Hallo," he said. " You're back."

For a minute I didn't say anything else. I wanted to shake his hand and tell him I was glad he was back. I knew that if he had been in a train-wreck or a car crash I should have shaken his hand and told him I was glad. Now somebody had shot him up and all I said was :

" When did you get in ? "

" About an hour ago."

" Everything O.K. ? "

" Wrapped her up."

" Well," I said. " Just like that ? "

" Just like that," he said.

I looked at his eyes. They were bleared and wet and excited. He had made a crash landing ; he was safe ; he was almost the best pilot in the outfit.

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"Anyone see me come in?" he said.

"Saw you from Control," someone said.

"How did it look?"

"Perfect until the bloody airscrew fell off."

Everyone laughed : as if airscrews falling off were a great joke. Nobody said anything about anybody being lucky to be back, but only :

"Have an argument?"

"Flak blew bloody great bit out of the wing. The inter-comm. went and then both turrets."

"Many fighters?"

"Ten at a time."

"Get one?"

"One certain. Just dissolved. One probable."

"Good show. What about the ships?"

"I think we pranged them."

"Good show," we said. "Good show."

We went on talking for a little longer about the trip : beautiful weather, sea very blue, landscape very green in the sun. And then he came back to the old subject.

"How did I land? What did it look like?"

"Beautiful."

"I couldn't get the tail down. Both tyres were punctured."

"Perfect all the same."

He looked quite happy. It was his point of pride, the good landing ; all he cared about now. With turrets gone, fuselage like a colander, wings holed, and one airscrew fallen off, he had nevertheless brought her down. And though we all knew it must have been hell no one said a word.

Presently his second dicky came into the anteroom. He was very young, about nineteen, with a smooth aristocratic face and smooth aristocratic hair. He looked too young to be part of a war and he was very excited.

"Went through my sleeve."

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He held up a cannon shell. Then he held up his arm. There was a neat tear in the sleeve of his battle-dress. He was very proud.

"And look at this."

Across the knuckles of his right hand there was a thread line of dried blood, neat, fine, barely visible. He wetted his other forefinger and rubbed across it, as if to be sure it wouldn't wash away.

"Came in on the starboard side and out the other."

"Good show," said somebody quite automatically. "Good show."

"Anybody hurt?" I asked.

"Engineer."

"Very bad?"

"Very bad. I bandaged him and gave him a shot coming home."

As he went on talking I looked down at his knees. There were dark patches on them, where blood had soaked through his flying-suit. But all that anyone said was:

"Think you pranged them?"

"Oh! sure enough. They've had it this time."

"Good show," we said. "Good show."

Now and then, as we talked, the little W.A.A.F. would come in from the telephone to tell someone he was wanted. With her quiet voice she would break for a moment the rhythm of excitement that was now rising through outbursts of laughter to exhilaration. She would hear for a second or two a snatch of the now boisterous but still laconic jargon of flight, "Think we may have pranged in, old boy. Good show. Piece of cake. No trouble at all," but there would be no sign on her calm and rather ordinary face that it conveyed anything to her at all. Nor did the crews, excited by the afternoon, the warmth and the relief of return, take any notice of her. She was an automaton, negative, outside of them, coming and going and doing her duty.

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Outside of them, too, I listened and gathered together and finally pieced together the picture of the raid ; and then soon afterwards the first real pictures of operations were brought in for the Wing Commander to see, and for a moment there was a flare of excitement. We could see the bomb-bursts across the battleships and the quays and then smoke over the area of town and docks. " You think we pranged them, sir ? " we said.

" Pranged them ? Like hell we did."

" Good show. Bloody good show."

" Slap across the Gluckstein."

" No doubt this time ? "

" No doubt."

" Good show," we said. " Good show."

At last, when the photographs had been taken away again, I went out of the ante-room into the hall. As I walked across it the little W.A.A.F., sitting by the telephone, looked up at me.

" A wonderful show, sir," she said.

I paused and looked at her in astonishment. I wondered for a moment how she could possibly know. There had been no time for her to hear the stories of the crews ; she had not seen the photographs ; she did not know that K for Kitty had been wrapped up and that it must have been hell to land on two dud tyres and with a broken airscrew ; she did not know that the ships had been hit or that over Brest, on that bright calm afternoon, it had been partly magnificent and partly hell.

" How did you know ? " I said.

She smiled a little and lifted her face and looked through the glass door of the ante-room.

" You can tell by their faces, sir," she said.

I turned and looked too. In the morning we should read about it in the papers ; we should hear the flat bulletins ; we should see the pictures. But now we were looking at something that could be

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read nowhere except in their eyes and expressed in no language but their own.

"Pretty good show," I said.

"Yes, sir," she said. "No trouble at all."

A PERSONAL WAR

He is a little fellow with an oval head that is quite bald except for a few feathery wisps of grey hair. He has a small tobacco-gold moustache, and sharp blue eyes and a way of bowing slightly when he speaks to you: as if he were nothing but the receptionist of a hotel, or a cashier at a bank, or a traveller in toys.

It is not until you look at his hands that you realise that they are not the hands of a man who books rooms for guests or counts money or winds up the keys of little engines. They are very short and thick and powerful hands and the finger-tips protrude unusally far beyond the small tight nails. Then after you have looked at his hands, which are so small yet so muscular and aggressive, you look back at his face, and you see then that the little stiff moustache and the sharp blue eyes and even the bald grey head are aggressive too, and that even the short and charming bow has another meaning. After talking to him for a little while you realise what this meaning is. He is a traveller in a Stirling, and his toys are guns.

We sit talking for a long time before he tells me this. It is winter and at the moment there are no operations. Still grey mists hang far over the flat land, and pools of yellow mud cover the track along which the bombers are lined up. It has been raining for a long time and there is no wind to drive the mist away.

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Suddenly, for no reason, he talks of America.

"You have been there?" I say.

"For a long time," he says. "I was born here, but mostly I lived there."

"Where?"

"In Texas mostly."

"Which is why they call you Tex?"

"Which is why they call me Tex," he says, with a smile.

"And how," I say, "do you feel about America?"

"America or Americans?"

"Americans."

"Which Americans?" he says.

We both laugh. I look out of the window and watch for a moment the rain dripping down through the mist on the huge iron-coloured wings of the Stirlings, and when I look back at him again I see that he has stopped laughing and is serious again.

"You think they don't understand?" I say.

"Not only that."

"What else?"

"It's not only time they understood," he says, "it's time they got angry. It's time they got good and angry too."

"Like you?"

"A bit more like me," he says.

He smiles and we sit without talking for a little while and I watch his hands. He has a way of crooking the fingers of his right hand into the fingers of the left, and then pulling them, as if they were triggers. Finally I ask him if he will have a drink and with a charming smile but without uncrooking his hands he says: "Possibly. Thank you. Possibly I will. It is very kind of you. Thank you."

"What will it be?"

"Thank you," he says. "A beer."

When the beer comes I ask him what it is like up

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there, in the rear-turret, on ops.—if he gets bored or tired or very cold, and he says, "No. Only just angry. Very good and angry all the time." I listen and soon he goes on to tell me about the flak : how it seems to come up slowly, very slowly, as if it will never climb into the darkness.

"Very bad too?"

"Not at all polite," he says.

"And in Texas," I say. "What were you doing there?"

"Sheriff."

"Gun and all?"

"Why sure," he says. "Gun and all. Notches and all."

So he goes on to tell me about the life in Texas, the life of a boy's dream : the gun and the notches, the sheriff and the posse, the remote, enormous country. As he talks I try to see the life as something real, but it unfolds itself to me only like a series of glimpses into a dusky unreality. I cannot believe in the gun, the little sheriff's office in the little town, the dusty plains, the posse, and the notches whittled on the gun-stock. I cannot believe in the life of his America any more than he can understand, now, the minds of so many who go on living it.

So we talk about flying again. He has not flown for a week and as I look at him I see that the small blue eyes are sharp and fretful with impatience as much as with anger. "My God, if I don't soon fly," he says, "I'll be swinging on the bloody chandelier."

He finishes the beer. "You will have another? Please. This time on me?"

I thank him and when the beer comes he talks a little more. There is a medal ribbon on his chest. It seems more real than the notches in the gun but I do not ask about it. Instead he tells me about a time when they stooged above the *Scharnhorst* at Brest. It was the day they scored a hit, and he

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talks for a time about this, casually, without anger, as if it were an afternoon picnic. It is as though battleships were impersonal things and I know suddenly that what he likes is the personal feeling about it all : the feeling of cold isolation in the rear turret, the sight of the flak climbing up in the darkness in slow coloured curls, the feeling of his own thick powerful hands on the guns.

I know that this is what he likes, but I still do not understand why he likes it. I do not understand why he likes it more than the life of a sheriff in a little Texas town, with his posse and his gun and the notches on the gun, as if he were a hero in a film. I do not understand why he has left that life, to fly in a country that is only half his own. I do not understand why he does not remain, like so many others, isolated, apart, away from it all.

And finally I ask him. "You really like it up there, don't you ?" I say.

"Like it ?"

"Yes."

For a moment he does not speak. Then he looks at me with a fierce little smile, his fingers tightly crooked into each other, his eyes screwed up, hard and intense.

"Like it ?" he says. There is nothing of the receptionist or the bank cashier or the traveller in toys about him now. He is far removed even from the little sheriff in the little Texas town. His eyes are furious and the smile in his face is quite deadly. He is caught up by a raw hatred of someone or something that is almost sublime and he no longer leaves me in any doubt as to who it is.

"Like it ? I was just born with a natural hatred of these swabs. I was born with it and all my life I've been living to work it off. Like it ?" he says, "it's a personal argument with me. It's a personal war !"

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Now I understand, and suddenly I feel quite small and there is nothing I can say.

I can only look out of the windows at the huge dark Stirlings shining dully on the perimeter in the rain, and hope that soon there will be a wind that will drive the mist away.

K FOR KITTY

HARRISON was one of those lean, brown, old-eyed Australians who seem to accept England with a tolerance that Canadians never know. If there were things about England that needed changing or setting right Harrison rarely talked about them. If there were better pilots I rarely met them. Harrison was quiet, modest, friendly, and as tough as hell.

It was not Harrison, but someone else, who first talked to me of the idea that 'planes and ships have the same delicate and temperamental ways. Just as you find no two ships alike, so you find no two 'planes alike ; just as you find ships that are heavy, graceless, unalive, so you find 'planes that are dull and wooden in the air. In the same way that seamen come to know, trust, and finally get fond of a ship, knowing that she is a living thing and will never fail them, so pilots come to know and trust and get fond of a 'plane, knowing she will bring them home. In every squadron, there is, I suppose, a 'plane that everybody hates. Then one day somebody quietly wraps it up in a distant corner of the 'drome and everybody is relieved and glad. But in every squadron there is a 'plane that everyone likes, that is something more than a pattern of steel and wood and instruments and mechanism, that is a living,

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graceful, fortunate, and ultimately triumphant thing, and this was the sort of 'plane that Harrison had.

Harrison's 'plane was a big four-engined Stirling called K for Kitty. The kite, like Harrison, was no stranger to the shaky do. On a trip to Brest the bomb doors froze up and would not release. This was bad enough. But the starboard outer also failed on the journey home ; so that Harrison was obliged to land on three engines, with a full bomb load, in darkness : the sort of heroism for which, at the moment, we have struck no special gong. On other trips other things happened. Something happened to the flaps ; the undercarriage jammed ; the radio went u.s.—it does not matter. For the heroism of overcoming such minor misfortunes there are no gongs either.

After such trips Harrison naturally trusted and grew fond of K for Kitty. Not that I think he ever said so. He would call the kite a good kite or perhaps, if he were a little happy, a wizard kite. These events in K for Kitty bore, after all, only a very slight relation to suicide. It was not until the big Brest trip that anything really serious happened to the 'plane.

I am not sure if this raid, made on a clear blue winter afternoon when the sunlight was light orange-coloured and the horizon peaceful with light haze, was the biggest ever made on Brest. But that night many bottles were opened and many songs sung, and I conclude from that, at least, that it was very big. And among the many 'planes that went Harrison was in K for Kitty.

Nor am I sure if they tried to blow Harrison to small pieces before he bombed, or after. Possibly both. Finally a force of Messerschmitts attacked him, in a rapid succession of ten, and put out of action every turret he had. Tracer tore at all

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angles through the nose and body of the 'plane. It shaved the skin off the knuckles of Harrison and his second dicky. It smashed the inter-comm. and mortally wounded the engineer. Blood flowed over the floor of the 'plane, mingling stickily with oil. It was hard to stand up and the gunners could not fire and there were no warning voices in the inter-comm.

Many other things had happened that Harrison did not then know about, but was to know about later. He was glad enough to see Spitfires coming up as escort, and the Messerschmitts diving home to tea. He was glad to be out of it, and setting course for home again. He was quite glad that K for Kitty was his 'plane.

At home, in the bright calm golden air of the late winter afternoon, Harrison brought her down gently and beautifully, making a perfect landing. He even succeeded in holding for some distance to the runway. And then everything that had not already happened began to happen at once. It was as if the kite had blown home held together only by strips of sticky plaster and string ; as if she were a toy 'plane, put together by children, that could not withstand the vibration of contact with earth.

She began to fall to pieces suddenly, terrifyingly, and almost systematically. The starboard outer airscrew fell off, and then the starboard inner engine fell out completely. Then the complete starboard wing fell off, and then both the fallen wing and the fallen engine caught fire. Just before she came to rest the port wing was flung high into the air like the arm of someone drowning, and remained there, high and stiff and awkward and dead.

I do not know how Harrison and the crew got out of the 'plane, slipping and skidding in the oily blood and lifting the wounded engineer, then skid-

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ding and falling down in the blood again, the 'plane burning all the time, the main door jammed and only the forward hatch available for lifting to safety the heavy wounded man. It seemed at any moment that the 'plane might blow up. But somehow Harrison and the crew and the wounded man got out and the 'plane did not blow up.

She was still there, in that lopsided, high-flung position, flat-tyred, partially burnt, when I went across the field next morning. Harrison was there too, looking at her. He was pacing up and down. The burnt, ash-covered wreckage of the 'plane lay scattered in an almost straight line across the grass. Beyond the last grey scraps of wreckage the tyre marks of the 'plane made brown parallel lines in the muddy grass as far as the runway. Harrison walked up the tracks made by the flattened tyres, stooped down to look at them and then walked back, stooping down again. Finally he came back to the 'plane.

We stood there for a long time together, looking at the 'plane. We picked up scraps of wreckage and dropped them again in the grass. We looked at the flattened tyres and the broken undercarriage and the splintered turret. We examined the ugly rising lines of tracer holes, neat and straight as the crotchets of a rising scale punched everywhere across the flat face of the fuselage. We stood under the high, up-flung wing, smashed by flak, that looked more than ever like a stiff dead arm. We looked at everything in amazement and unbelief and then looked again.

Long after I left, Harrison was still standing by the 'plane. And once, as I walked across the field, I turned and looked back.

He was still standing there in the same attitude, looking at K for Kitty. I could not see his face, but it seemed as if he were looking at something

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rather distantly. It seemed even possible that he was looking at something he could not see.

It was like the attitude of a seaman who looks across empty water, for the last time, and sees his ship no longer there.

THE GREATEST PEOPLE IN THE WORLD

He was very young, and because he was also very fair, he sometimes looked too young to have any part in the war at all; and more than anything else, as always, he wanted to fly.

It was his fairness that made him look so very much like one of the aristocracy, or at least very upper middle class, and I was very surprised to find that his people were labourers from a village in Somerset. His father was a hedger and ditcher with a fancy for leaving little tufts of hawthorn unclipped above the line of hedge. These tufts would grow into little ornamental balls, and later were clipped, gradually, summer by summer, into the shapes of birds. His father hoped, Lawson would explain to me, that bullfinches would use them for nesting-places. I never met either his father or his mother, but I gathered that they must have been at least forty when he was born. I gathered too that his mother cleaned at the local rectory and that she worked in the fields, harvesting and haymaking and pea-picking and cabbage-planting, whenever she had the chance or the time.

It was not only that Lawson wanted to fly. He had never wanted to do anything else but fly. It was the only life he had had time to know. There must have been thousands of young men like him, all reading the technicalities of the job in flight

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magazines, all passionately studying new designs, all longing for a flip, all flying Spitfires in imagination. But there were certain circumstances which made the case of Lawson different.

The chief of these circumstances, and the one which was in fact never altered, was that his parents were poor. When Lawson heard other people with incomes of five or six hundred or more a year talking of having no money he thought of his parents. His father knocked up a regular wage of two pounds a week. In summer he managed to increase this by ten or twelve shillings by gardening in the evenings and his mother put in a weekly average of about sixteen hours at sixpence an hour at the rectory. As a boy, Lawson went harvesting and haymaking for about sixpence a day and doing odd jobs on Saturdays in the rectory kitchen. And somehow, out of this, they bought him an education.

I don't know who was at the back of this idea of education. It may have been the rector. Most likely it was the rector and the mother. Lawson's father, I gathered, was a solid, unimaginative man who was rather content to let things remain as they were. He worked hard for three hundred and sixty-two days of the year—he tended his own garden on Sundays—and then got roaring tight on Christmas Eve, Flower Show Saturday, and the local Easter Monday races. It obviously wasn't he who had the idea of education, yet once the idea had been conceived he was behind it wholly and with all the solidity of his nature. For two years he and the mother saved up every extra penny they earned; every pea picked, every potato picked up, every forkful of hay turned over was something extra to the account. The house where they lived was old and damp, with unplastered walls and a brick floor and cracks in the window-frames that were stuffed with paper. The only light they had was a little oil

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lamp which they carried from room to room if they wanted a light in another place. They bought half a hundredweight of coal each week and on Friday afternoons the mother wetted the last shovelful of coal and banked up the fire so that it would last till evening.

When Lawson was fourteen they were able to send him to the local grammar school. Or at least they were going to send him. Everything was arranged for him to start in September when one of those little accidents happened that often greatly affect the course of people's lives. Lawson fell off a bridge and broke his left arm. By the time it was better the vacancies in the first school were filled and he was sent instead to a school about fifteen miles away. He travelled there every day by train.

It was at this school that he heard the remark that was to affect, and crystallise, his whole life. The third term he was there, within a week or so of his fifteenth birthday, he heard a lecture in the school hall on the work of the R.A.F. When the lecture began, he told me, he really wasn't very interested. When he came out he could not get out of his mind something the lecturer had said about those who fly. "I often think," the lecturer said, "that they are the greatest people in the world."

When I knew Lawson the war was two years old, He had graduated rather uneventfully in the usual way, up through Moths and Ansons and so to light bombers, until now he was captain of a Stirling. There was even then a kind of premature immobility about him, especially about his eyes, so that the pupils sometimes looked seared, cauterised, burnt out. His first trouble was to have been made a bomber pilot at all. He had been through the usual Spitfire complex ; all roaring glory and victory rolls. The thought of long flights of endurance, at night, with nothing to be seen except the flak coming up at you in slow sinister curls, the earth in the light

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of a flare, and then the flare-path at base if you were lucky and the fog hadn't come down, shook him quite a lot. It may have been this that accounted for what happened afterwards.

He had stayed at school until he was eighteen, and had virtually walked straight out of school into the Air Force. What struck me most was that there was no disruption, no disloyalty, between himself and his parents. There might well have been. Their life, simple, bound to earth, lighted by that cheap paraffin lamp which they carried from room to room, compressed into the simple measure of hard work, saving, and devotion, was like the life of another age compared with the life they had chosen for him. I don't know what education exactly meant to them ; I don't know what ambitions they had for him. But neither could have been connected with his flying a bomber. Yet they never uttered the smallest reproach or protest to what must have been rather a terrifying prospect to them. They might have thought that it would be better for him to be ploughing his own good Somerset clay. They probably did. But if they did they didn't once say so. They simply knew he wanted to fly and they let him fly because it was the thing that was nearest his heart.

His own part was just as straightforward and steadfast. As I became acquainted with it I didn't wonder at all that he had been made a bomber pilot. The qualities for it were all there in his behaviour towards these two simple, self-sacrificial people. They had sent him to a pretty expensive school—to them it must have been fabulous—and he might easily have turned his back on them. A touch of swollen head and he might easily have decided that he was too good for that shabby little cottage, with the unplastered walls, the windows stuffed with paper, and the one cheap paraffin lamp carried

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from room to room. But I don't suppose he ever dreamed of it. He not only remained loyal to them but loyal in a positive way. He sent home to them a third of his pay every month : which for a Pilot Officer meant practically the same sacrifice as they had made for him.

He couldn't in fact have been more steadfast and careful. Perhaps he was too steadfast and, if it's possible as the captain of a crew of seven in a very expensive piece of aircraft, too careful. Yet nothing went right for him. Before his first big trip with a Stirling he felt the same dry mental tension, and the same sour wet slackness of the stomach, that you feel before a race. It was a sort of cold excitement. He felt it get worse as he taxied the aircraft across the field. It was winter and there was a kind of smokiness in the falling twilight over the few distant trees, and the hangars, looming up with their red lights burning, looked enormous. The runway seemed foreshortened and it looked practically impossible not to prang something on take-off. He was certain it would be all right once he was up, but it was the idea of lugging 32 tons of aircraft off the wet runway, that was soft in places, and in half-light, which worried him.

He was worked up to a very high state of tension, with the kite actually on the runway, when Control informed him that the whole show would be scrubbed. His crew swore and mouthed at everybody and everything all the way back to dispersal. He felt too empty to say anything. He felt as if his stomach had dropped out and that he might be going to pieces. The awful anti-climax of the thing was too much.

That night he didn't sleep very well. He fell asleep and then woke up. His blankets had slipped and he was very cold and he did not know what time it was. He could hear his watch ticking very

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loudly. Someone had left a light on in the passage outside and it shone through the fan-light of the bedroom door. He lay for hours watching it, sleepless, cold, his mind full of the impression of the wet runway, the hangars looming up in the twilight, the idea that he was about to prang something on take-off.

Then he fell asleep and dreamed that he really did prang something. He was taking-off and his port wing hit the control tower, which had wide, deep, circular windows. Through these windows he could see Brand, the control officer, and a little Flying Officer named Danvers, and the two orderlies, one wearing earphones. The two officers were drinking tea and his wing knocked the cups out of their hands. The tea shot up in a brown wave that broke on Brand's tunic, and he saw vividly the look of helpless and terrified indignation on Brand's face a second before he was hit and died.

It was fantastic, but very real also, and he woke in a terrible sweat of fear, scared solely by the happenings of the dream. He was relieved to find it a waking dream ; that it was already daylight beyond the drawn curtains. It was in fact already late and he got up hurriedly and went down to breakfast without shaving. After breakfast he went straight over to the hangars and hoped there would be flying that day. But the weather was worse : grey fenland distances, gathering ground mist, spits of cold rain. The Wing Commander usually got the crews running round the perimeter track for training, but that morning the weather was too bad, there was no running and by eleven o'clock the crews were fretting for an afternoon stand-down. Lawson went over to his aircraft, but everything was nicely fixed there and his stooges were sheltering under the wings, out of the rain, smoking. As he walked back in the rain to Control and went up the

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concrete stairs to the room where, in his dream, he had crashed through the wide windows and had killed Brand and Danvers, he saw at once that Brand and Danvers were not on duty, and by this fact, the fact that Brand and Danvers had been on duty at the time of the dream, he felt the reality of the dream grow brighter instead of fade.

After he had had the orderly bring him a cup of tea he drank it quickly and then went out alone. The trouble was perhaps that he was at that time a stranger in the station. There was no one—and it must have been better if there had been someone—to whom he could say, joking : " Had a hell of a queer dream last night. Dreamt I pranged the control tower. Brand was stooging around as usual and got it in the neck. He looked pretty damned funny when I knocked the tea out of his hands." But he knew no one very well, and could say nothing about the dream. It was like a complex personal problem. Once you had explained it to someone else it was no longer personal ; it ceased to be complex and finally it ceased to be a problem at all.

Unfortunately he could not do this, and unfortunately there was a recurrence of the dream that night. It was the same dream precisely, with one important exception. It was now not Brand or Danvers who were killed, but two men named Porter and Evans, the duty officers for that night. The painful brightness of the dream was identical ; he could see the brown tea steaming as it splashed on Porter's jacket and he could see on his face, as on Brand's face, the indignant, ridiculous terror.

The next morning the weather was much better, and by noon it was certain there would be ops. that night. At briefing he felt much as if he had a hangover. He concentrated hard on the met. talk, but his head ached and the green and pink and mauve contour lines of the map troubled his eyes.

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The target was Hamburg, a fairly long hard trip, and his own take-off was at 18.00 hours. By the time he reached his aircraft the light was no longer good, but there was no mist and only thin cloud in a wasting blue sky. For some reason he now felt better: clearer-headed, quite confident. His stomach was dry and tight and the period of distrust in himself was practically over.

Then something else happened. His outer port engine would not start. As he sat there in the aircraft, struggling to get things going, his crew on edge, his engineer bewildered and furious by this inexplicable behaviour of an engine that had been tested only that morning, he felt his confidence breaking down again. The light was dying rapidly on the fringes of the field and he knew what must happen any moment now. "It's just one of these bloody damn things," the engineer said over and over again. "Just one of these damn bloody aggravating bastard things." Some minutes later Lawson, not listening much now to the engineer, heard what he expected to hear from Control. The trip was off; the margin of time was past. "Is it understood?" said Control in the voice of an ironical automatic parrot. "Is it understood?"

After this second disappointment he went through the same nervous agony of not sleeping. Because the breaking of tension at a vital moment was the cause in both cases you might have said he was trying too hard. But the third occasion seemed to have nothing to do with this. He was again on operations, and again it was evening, with the fringes of the 'drome blue-grey with winter mist, the runway pooled with water, the red lights like beacons on the black mountains of the hangars. This time he actually got up off the runway. He had actually got over the sickening horror that for the third time running some damnable triviality would stop him

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from getting the kite air-borne. But soon that was past, and he was following the others. The sun had already set, leaving huge cloud-broken lakes of pale green and yellow light for miles above the sunset point, and towards these immense spaces of rapidly fading light he watched the black wings of the Stirlings fading into the distance until at last it was too dark and the lakes of light and the 'planes were no longer there to see. Then for the first time for weeks he felt good : strained but calm, sure of himself, settled.

I suppose they had been flying about an hour when the icing began. They were over the sea when the kite began to make sickening and heavy plunges in the darkness : movements to which there was only one answer. Lawson felt suddenly up against all the old trouble again : the inexplicable bad luck, the frustration, the disastrous break of tension. He felt himself lose heart. His guts became wet and cold and sour and then seemed to drop out of him. His only piece of luck was that he had not flown far, and when he had safely jettisoned his bombs and turned the kite for home he bitterly told himself that it was the only piece of luck he had ever had as a pilot or was ever likely to have. But even that was not all. As he came in to land it was as if there were some evil and persistent Jonah in the kite with him : somebody for whom the simplest moments were inexplicably turned into pieces of hellish and ironical misfortune. Lawson landed perfectly in the darkness, but the runway was wet and greasy after rain. He put on the brakes, but nothing happened. The kite drove fast down the runway and then skidded into a ground loop that brought it to a standstill on the grass, the undercarriage smashed. To Lawson it was like the end of everything.

He expected to be grounded any moment after

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that. His despair was sour and keen and personal; he could tell no one about it. For about a week he did not sleep much. He did not dream either. He re-created the few moments of ill-luck until they were moments of positive and monstrous failure. And as if this were not enough he created new moments, sharp and terrible seconds of stalling, ground-looping, crash-landing, over-shooting the 'drome. He imagined himself coming in too slow, another time too fast. It never mattered much. He was going to prang control tower in any case, killing the occupants there as they drank their last over-sweetened steaming tea.

Then by accident he discovered it possible to get some sleep. He began to sleep with the light on. The Station at that time was not very crowded; later two and even three people slept in a room. But now no one could see him giving way—not that he was ever the only one—to the fear of sleeping in the dark. In this way he slept quite well for about a week; it was fairly peaceful; he was not cold; he did not have the recurrent dreams. And above all, they did not ground him.

I don't know if they were ever thinking of it; but it never in fact became necessary. Another thing happened: this time not just ill-luck, frustration, a mistake, a private illusion about something, but a simple and terrible fact. It was a telegram from the Rector of his village in Somerset. His parents had been killed in a raid.

After that telegram he got compassionate leave and went home. The next morning he stood in the garden of the house, staring at the bony, burnt roof timbers, the red-grey dust and rubble, the bare scorched blue wall-paper, of the two rooms where the cheap little paraffin lamp had once been carried to and fro. It was winter time. Red dust lay on the frozen leaves of the brussels-sprouts; the hawthorn

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twigs, fancifully clipped by his father above the line of hedge, were almost the only things about the place that remained untouched and as before. He did not stay very long ; but while he stayed there he thought he saw his mother working in the fields, skirt pinned behind her and his father with the hedge-hook in his hand and the black twigs flying in the air. He saw for a moment their lives with the simple clearness of grief, the lives remote from his own, so utterly simple and so utterly remote, yet bound to him elementally.

When he went back to the station three days later, he had forgotten about the dreams, the illusions, and all the rest of it ; or at least it was as if he had forgotten. All the reality of the bad moments, if it had been reality, was now obscured by the simple reality of the dusty and fire-blackened little house.

All that he had to do now seemed also quite simple and clear ; terribly simple and terribly clear. If he ever had been afraid, there was no longer any sign of it as he took off for a daylight raid over Northern Germany two days later. It was a cold, clear winter afternoon ; there was just enough power in the sunlight to reveal the colours of the fields. He used to say it was one of those trips where you felt the aircraft had been shot from a gun. You got away clean and smooth and easy ; there was no hitch. Instinctively, from the first, you knew it was a piece of cake. You went over and did the job and no matter what came up at you you knew that, ultimately, it would be all right. That afternoon flak tore a strip off his flaps and for about half an hour his crew did nothing but yell gloriously through the intercomm. that fighters were coming up from everywhere. Cannon fire hit his middle turret and put it out of action and sprayed the fuselage from end to end with raw ugly little holes. Inland over Germany he lost a lot of height chasing and finally

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shooting down an Me. 109, and he discovered he could not regain his height as he came back over the coast and sea. But even that did not trouble him then. Everything was clear at last. His whole life was clear.

He came over the English coast and then the English fields, at about two or three hundred feet. The sun was still shining, but sometimes there were clouds and then it was light in patches on the fields below and dark in the upper air. He roared over fields and woods and roads and over the little dusty blue towns and over remote farms where he could even see the hens feeding and scuttling in the dark winter grass.

He came so low once that for a second or so he saw people in the fields. For an instant he saw a man and woman working. They raised flat, astonished faces to look at the great 'plane overhead. The woman perhaps was picking sticks and he thought he saw the man lean for a moment on a fork. They might have been old or young, he could not tell ; they lifted their heads and in a second were cut off by the speed of the 'plane. But in this second, as he saw them transfixed on the earth below him and before the speed of the 'plane cut them off for ever, he remembered his own people. He remembered them as they had lived, simple and sacrificing, living only for him, and he saw them alive again in the arrested figures of the two people in the field below : as if they were the same people, the same simple people, the same humble, faithful, eternal people, giving always and giving everything : the greatest people in the world.

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